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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 90

**THE CASE OF
CHRISTOPHER SMART**

BY

LAURENCE BINYON, C.H., LL.D., D.LITT.

PRESIDENT 1934

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December, 1934



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THE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER SMART

IN the days of my boyhood I nourished a fervent admiration for the poetry of Robert Browning, whose latest volumes were then still appearing at fairly frequent intervals. I remember eagerly reading when it first came out the volume called *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* and trying or pretending to get more pleasure out of it than it actually gave me. The book is now, I fancy, wellnigh forgotten, and if remembered it is chiefly for the sake of Christopher Smart, who is the subject of one of the parleyings. Browning delighted to recite in his loud, sonorous voice stanzas of the *Song to David*, and the enthusiasm which he communicated to others was in some measure the means of rescuing from oblivion a poem which was not included in the author's collected verse, and which till comparatively lately was difficult to procure. After reading the *Parleyings* I was naturally most eager to read the *Song*, but for many years all I could discover of it was the two stanzas which Palgrave extracted from it and printed in his *Golden Treasury*.

The life and the work of Smart present a problem; just the kind of problem which made a particular appeal to the casuist in Browning, always pre-occupied with the human soul, always seeking to follow it into its obscure recesses and illuminate its dark and secret workings. Smart was a case of fascinating interest.

Here was a man who in the eyes of the world cut no reputable figure. He had few of the social virtues; he was shiftless, incompetent to manage his affairs, often in debt, a drunkard, vain, given to lying, not over-clean in his person; and worse than these infirmities in the eyes of the eighteenth century was his 'enthusiasm'. What more shocking to society than the spectacle of this eccentric and ill-dressed creature suddenly stopping in the Strand to kneel on the pavement and passionately say his prayers? For if not shining in morality, he was fundamentally religious. Such mixtures and contrasts in the strangeness of our human nature are not uncommon. A poet of our time, Verlaine, provides something of a parallel; a spontaneously immoral yet religious nature. But in their work there is a remarkable difference. Verlaine was always an exquisite and highly original writer. Smart on the contrary was as a poet not more than mediocre. He conformed to the taste of his time; he had a certain ingenuity, a rhetorical gift, which gave him what reputation he enjoyed in his lifetime; but except for an occasional line or stanza he wrote nothing of

enduring power except the one poem, the *Song to David*, which he composed in the madhouse where for a period he was confined. In that poem he appears as a different being. He has escaped from his century, he breathes another air. His poetic stature is incredibly heightened, his powers indefinitely enlarged.

What can explain this extraordinary phenomenon?

Browning, after his manner, argues the matter back and forth, in what I cannot help thinking now to be rather indifferent verse. You may remember how he professed to have dreamed that he was exploring some huge house, had gone

Through room and room complacently, no dearth
Anywhere of the signs of decent taste,
Adequate culture,

then suddenly pushing open a door found himself in the Chapel,
from floor to roof one evidence

Of how far earth may rival heaven, no niche
Where glory was not prised to enrich
Man's gaze with gold and gems.

Full of wonder and anticipation he passes on to the rest of the house, only to find 'calm commonplace', as before. He goes on to surmise of Smart

The man was sound
And sane at starting: all at once the ground
Gave way beneath his step, a certain smoke
Curled up and caught him, or perhaps down broke
A fire-ball wrapping flesh and spirit both
In conflagration. Then as heaven were loth
To linger . . . off fell
The flame-robe and the untransfigured man
Resumed sobriety.
How came you (he asks) to resume the void and null?

What if in one point only, then and there,
The otherwise all-unapproachable
Allowed impingement?

Sofar as I can understand the argument, Browning appears to decide that the poem came in a moment of transcendent illumination; and though willing to concede that the marvel may have come to pass

The way folk judged, if power too long suppressed
Broke loose and maddened, as the vulgar guessed,

what specially puzzles him is the fact that Smart having just once proved himself capable of splendid poetry was entirely unable to repeat his achievement. It seems to me that this is less remarkable than that such a poetic power should have remained dormant

and apparently non-existent through the greater part of the poet's life. We know how the pious editor of Smart's collected poems omitted the *Song to David*, as 'affording melancholy proofs of the estrangement of the poet's mind'. On the other hand, Mr. Blunden has unearthed an advertisement printed by the publisher of the first edition of the *Song*, according to which 'this song was allowed by Mr. Smart's judicious friends and enemies to be the best piece ever made public by him; its chief fault being the exact regularity and method with which it is conducted'. In fact when we read the Argument prefixed to the poem, there seems to be some justification for this last criticism. Let me quote from it:

The excellence and lustre of David's character in twelve points of view. The subjects he made choice of—the Supreme Being, angels, men of renown; the works of nature in all directions, either particularly or collectively considered.—An exercise upon the Decalogue. The transcendent virtues of praise and adoration. An exercise upon the seasons and the right use of them. An exercise upon the senses and how to subdue them. An amplification in five degrees which is wrought up to this conclusion that the best poet which every lived was thought worthy of the highest honour which possibly can be conceived.

Can we not imagine the Rev. Christopher Hunter reading this analysis with complete approval, and anticipating in the poem so prefaced an essay in verse on the accepted eighteenth-century model, not different in style or substance from the poems on the attributes of the Supreme Being which had won for Smart his reputation at Cambridge and which were thought to reflect so much honour on his college? But when he came to the *Song* itself, how disconcerting to find such regrettable 'enthusiasm', such licence of expression, such odd syntax, such obscure allusions; verse, in short, so thoroughly incorrect.

Yet these characteristics, however unlooked for in 1763, hardly amount to 'estrangement of mind': and one would like to know what exactly were the 'melancholy proofs' which so alarmed Mr. Hunter. No doubt his taste was offended; but I surmise that what seemed to him signs of madness were the often inconsequent succession of images, the strange collocations, and the abrupt transitions. Such a stanza as this, for example:

Open and naked of offence,
Man's made of mercy, soul, and sense.
God armed the snail and wilk.
Be good to him that pulls thy plough;
Due food and care, due rest allow
For her that yields thee milk.

Indeed, what gives the poem its peculiar character is this; that while the plan of it is methodical and deliberate, the general effect is one of excitement and a certain incoherence, like the sudden shiftings of a kaleidoscope.

If we analyse the poem, the life goes out of it: 'we murder to dissect.' In the Argument, which no doubt was composed afterwards but which does give the matter of the poem, Reason appears all too much in control. But in the poem itself what are analysed as sections seem to disappear under the spontaneous rush and glow which unify them all. There is a sense of continuous mounting movement, as of an upward spiral, culminating in the superb close. The abrupt transitions now seem as if they were the effect of a singer pausing to take breath before attacking the next theme in his mind, by no means of the essayist pausing after making one point before he passes to the next. And again the strange collocations seem the perfectly natural result of a mind so overbrimming with the glories of the world, so filled with images rushing in from near and far, that it cannot stop to order them in detail, it must harvest them in their vivid freshness, at whatever cost. We seem worlds away from exercises on the Decalogue, exercises on the seasons, and on the senses.

The theme of the poem is King David, but under the ostensible theme, overflowing and inundating it, is the more general motive of the Benedicite: 'O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.'

Praise above all—for praise prevails.
Heap up the measure, load the scales
And good to goodness add.

It is in the stanzas following this, the stanzas on Adoration, that Smart shows himself farthest from his own time. There is no veil between our eyes and the thing seen. It is a scented and coloured profusion.

For Adoration seasons change,
And order, truth, and beauty range,
Adjust, attract, and fill;
The grass the polyanthus cheques;
And polish'd porphyry reflects
By the descending rill.

Rich almonds colour to the prime
For Adoration; tendrils climb
And fruit-trees pledge their gems;
And Iris with her gorgeous vest
Builds for her eggs her cunning nest,
And bell-flowers bow their stems.

With vinous syrup cedars spout;
From rocks pure honey gushing out
For Adoration springs;
All scenes of painting crowd the map
Of nature; to the mermaid's pap
The scaled infant clings.

The spotted ounce and playsome cubs
Run rustling 'mongst the flowering shrubs
And lizards feed the moss.
For Adoration beasts embark,
While waves upholding halcyon's ark
No longer roar and toss.

Now labour his reward receives,
For Adoration counts his sheaves
To peace, her beauteous prince;
The nectarine his strong tint imbibes
And apples of ten thousand tribes
And quick peculiar quince.

The wealthy crops of whitening rice
'Mongst thyrine woods and groves of spice
For Adoration grow;
And marshalled in the fenced land
The peaches and pomegranates stand
Where wild carnations blow.

The laurels with the winter strive;
The crocus burnishes alive
Upon the snow-clad earth.
For Adoration myrtles stay
To keep the garden from dismay
And bless the sight from dearth.

We note for one thing a freshness in the rhyme-sounds. The school of Pope preferred common rhymes to rare ones. These fresh rhymes add a stimulating crispness to the verse. The rhythm is plain and without subtleties. The stanza indeed does not lend itself to subtle rhythm; that is not in its character. But the poem, with all its sudden transitions, has such momentum that it seems to gather speed as it goes, and one cannot think of another form of stanza which would better carry the theme. Then we note on the pictorial side a freshness also of vision. The taste of the time to which Smart hitherto had conformed, rejoiced in generalization; it was soaked in Latinism; lines like

Here blushing Flora paints the enamelled ground

were thought to have the true ring of poetry. A certain remove from the direct picturing of things seen was preferred and prescribed.

It is true that Thomson's *Seasons*, with their elaborate descriptions of landscape, had introduced a different mode. Thomson's 'yellow wall-flowers, stained an iron-brown' bring the object before the eye. But we feel at once a difference between such minuteness of observation and Smart's

The crocus burnishes alive
Upon the snow-clad earth.

This is not merely observation, it is illumination. We not only see but we feel the life of the flower; it makes a glory in the mind. And that is above all what the poem communicates; the glory of the world, an intoxication of the senses, never separated from, always penetrated by, an intoxication of the soul with the idea of the Creator. It is this profound feeling of unity in the whole creation which fuses together the less coherent elements of the poem as in a flaming glow. And the suddenness with which the images are projected evokes the prodigality of Nature as no logical sequence could.

There is no doubt in the *Song* a certain wildness such as is popularly associated with insanity. Yet actually Smart's madness seems to have taken the form of a literal interpretation of the injunction *Pray without ceasing*. He embarrassed visitors by insisting on their joining him in his supplications. Dr. Johnson had the lowest opinion of the verse Smart wrote in his sanity—we don't know his opinion of the *Song*. Asked whether Smart or Derrick was the better poet, 'Sir,' he replied, 'there is no settling the point of precedency between a louse and a flea.' But his human sympathies were large; he liked the man. 'I would as lief pray with Kit Smart,' he said, 'as with any one else.'

Obsession with a fixed idea is a common form of insanity. But such obsessions are a mental imprisonment; whereas the *Song* is unmistakably the expression of a great release. I speak as a mere layman in these matters, but it seems to me that, while there is nothing in the poem to betray an insane mind—no confusion of the real with the unreal—the mental disturbance must somehow have indirectly affected Smart by shaking him out of his normal self, so that for the time he was freed from the inhibitions which had dominated till then his creative impulses.

For the *Song* is spontaneous, it manifestly flows from the inner core and genius of the man. In his madhouse cell he was alone

with himself and the God of his adoration. He was enabled to cast off the contemporary mode, and his accustomed methods of composition. The verse gushes forth with all the impetus of a liberated stream.

Let us try to realize what it meant in the mid-eighteenth century to revolt from the authority of the time. That is extremely difficult in an age like ours, when everything is questioned and no authority accepted. Then there was, on the contrary, an apparently universal conformity with the accepted canons of taste and style. Let us try to realize a time when a phrase like

Sequacious of the lyre

gave readers of poetry an extraordinary pleasure; a time when such a picture as

to the mermaid's pap
The scaled infant clings

was probably as affronting to taste as a pre-Raphaelite painting thrust before the eyes of Reynolds and his circle.

The vividness and freshness of the imagery delight us in the *Song*; but they would give no special pleasure to orthodox contemporary taste. And the whole mood of the poem, the kind of mood which inspired

Use all thy passions! love is thine
And joy, and jealousy divine

and

Precious the bounteous widow's mite
And precious for extreme delight
The largess from the churl

would have seemed to savour of intemperance, of an extravagant and regrettable enthusiasm.

Smart, as I said, was in his time of insanity thrown back upon himself. I imagine that he had no thought of a public in his mind; at any rate he had no care to propitiate his usual public and comply with its demands. Had he then been suppressing all his life a spring of poetry native to himself and independent of the taste of his own day? Is it possible to find any clue in his life or his earlier verse?

Born prematurely, he was a delicate child and debarred from the normal activities of boyhood. At the age of four, according to his biographer, he produced 'an extraordinary effusion'. This has not been preserved; but at thirteen he wrote some verses, 'To Ethelinda, on her doing my verses the honour of wearing them in her bosom'; verses of a precociously amorous strain.

Possibly still earlier—at least it is put first in his collected work—is a little ‘Ode to Idleness’.

Sister of Peace and Indolence,
Bring, Muse, bring numbers soft and slow
Elaborately void of sense,
And sweetly thoughtless let them flow.

Elaborately void of sense! We recall that typical couplet of the Age of Reason

Others to some faint meaning make pretence
But Shadwell never deviates into sense,

And we wonder at this strange aspiration. Are we hearing already from the depth of the eighteenth century the voice of Miss Gertrude Stein? Is Smart aspiring, in our modern phrase, to exploit the subconscious, to make of poetry an incantation, lulling the logical processes of thought to sleep? Nothing seems to come of it; it is just a hint, and I suppose we must not make too much of it. Still, it is remarkable, and would seem much more so if the phrasing were not so entirely of the time.

Other poets whose temperament could find no satisfying mode of expression in the Popian couplet turned instinctively to earlier models, as Blake for instance was to turn to the songs of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Blake, however, had the advantage of coming into the world a whole generation later.

Smart was born in Kent, in April 1722. He was sent to school at Durham; but some early association of his boyhood, perhaps a visit to Penshurst, kept before him the image of Philip Sidney, and he seems at one time to have been intoxicated with the romantic atmosphere of the ‘Arcadia’. But whatever he may have read of Elizabethan romance and poetry has not affected the texture of his verse, as they affected the boyish poems of Blake, and later of Keats. Here is a passage from a pastoral called ‘The Noon Piece, or Mowers at Dinner’:

Or where coy Daphne’s thickest shade
Drives amorous Phœbus from the glade
There read Sydney’s high-wrought stories
Of ladies’ charms and heroes’ glories;
Thence fired, the sweet narration act
And kiss the fiction into fact.

One feels the gusto of satisfaction with which Smart wrote that last line. It has the epigrammatic turn, the making of a point, which Smart’s contemporaries enjoyed as something essential to poetry.

Another little piece may detain us a moment—it is called a fable. Smart pictures Imagination wooing Reason. She comes to Reason's little cottage

Before, a river deep and still;
Behind, a rocky soaring hill.

'You dwell alone,' she cries, 'and are too grave.' And she hints that these solitary studies pursued too far will lead to madness.

The Doctors soon will find a flaw
And lock you up in chains and straw.

Excess of reason, you will note, not excess of imagination, will lead to madness. Here again is something to arrest us in a poem of that period. I think of Blake's design in *Jerusalem*, where Imagination looks with pity and horror at the man of Reason in torment. In Smart's poem Reason is invited

To those bright plains where crowd in swarms
The spirits of fantastic forms,
To natures still above themselves.
I'll bring you to the pearly cars
By dragons drawn above the stars,
To colours of Arabian glow
And to the heart-dilating show
Of paintings which surmount the life.

But Reason, while consenting to be Imagination's 'correspondent and ally', refused the proffered marriage:

I cannot take thee for a mate.
I'm lost if e'er I change my state.

What was in Smart's mind when he composed this fable, whether he had any fears already for his own sanity, how significant it is, I do not feel able to divine. Certainly there is no note of lived experience such as sounds in a line which Wordsworth might have written and which occurs in a poem composed on recovering from a dangerous illness,

My mind lay open to the powers of Night.

This poem was written in 1756, just after the series of poems on the Eternity, the Immensity, the Omniscience, and the Goodness of the Supreme Being, which won in almost successive years the Seatonian Prize at Cambridge. These compositions are not at all remarkable as poetry, but they helped perhaps to deepen the channel of Smart's thoughts and caused him to be more pre-occupied than ever with the relation of the human soul to God.

We do not find then much to throw light on Smart's interior mind in his other works; there are hints of poetic sensibility; but

there is nothing to show that he was in any sense a conscious rebel against the literary conventions of his own day.

At the same time that Smart was writing the *Song*, a boy of genius in Bristol was seeking to find a medium of expression in poetry which would satisfy his instincts as the current poetic medium could not satisfy them. Rummaging among antique documents gave him a hint. He found there language still in a fluid state, not yet fixed; a world of richer colour than his own age; words and phrases, the meaning of which he could only surmise but which were all the more exciting to imagination on that account; and he was fired with an idea. Here was a means of escape from his own century, with its formal taste and imposed conventions. So Chatterton, who could write deft satirical verse in the fashionable style, became a poet only when he put on a medieval disguise.

Smart had no such taste for medieval things. For him, as for his contemporaries, Gothic meant barbarous. As a writer he was nurtured on the Bible, Milton, and the classics; and among the classics chiefly on Horace. He accepted in fact the limitations of the traditional public-school and university education in England. He translated Horace; and in the preface to his verse translation there is a passage pointed out by Mr. Blunden which is almost the only evidence of Smart's interest in the technique of poetry. 'Besides the *Curiosa Felicitas*', he says, 'there is another poetical excellence: I mean the beauty, force, and vehemence of Impression . . . a talent or gift of Almighty God, by which a Genius is empowered to throw an emphasis upon a word or sentence in such wise that it cannot escape any reader of sheer good sense and critical sagacity.'

It would be interesting to know how Smart would have illustrated this observation, for his language is not very precise. Was he perhaps thinking of Horace's wonderful sense of the value of *position*, of the way in which a word may acquire from its position in a stanza a strangely heightened power? And yet there is something in the words 'beauty, force, and vehemence' which seems to be less an Horatian quality than a quality personal to Smart himself when he wrote the *Song to David*. Horace is, I think, an influence in the *Song*; the close packing of the Horatian stanzas necessitates a pregnant concision, a juxtaposition of images with no elaboration of logical sequence and connexion; and the attempt to achieve like effects appears in the *Song*, though with little of the Latin poet's consummate art.

Please do not think that I am trying to explain the genesis of the *Song to David* by the literary influences which may have

affected its author. We can see a certain influence from Horace, and possibly from Milton in such stanzas as

The world—the clustering spheres he made,
The glorious light, the soothing shade,
Dale, champaign, grove and hill;
The multitudinous abyss
Where secrecy remains in bliss
And wisdom hides her skill.

But, after all, how little this amounts to!

What I am trying to discover is the furniture of Smart's mind. For however inspired a poet may be, he is limited by his own experience, by what he has seen and heard and felt, and by what he has read and consciously or unconsciously remembered. Nothing is more striking in Smart's poem than the wide range of his picturing fancy. His mind roams the world and brings back vivid images. Actually Smart was an untravelled man; Cambridge and London were all he knew in adult life, though he had passed through England in his school-days. He would have seen the crocus 'burnishing alive' in a snow-clad English garden; and in July had smelt the blossom when the dew 'drops upon the leafy limes'. He had noted in the lengthening days of spring the 'pink and mottled vault' of the sky. These came from direct observation. But sugar-canes and pine-apples and coco-nuts, ostriches and sword-fish, porphyry and humming-birds; where do these come from? Smart seems to have been as avid of travel-books as Coleridge. They called up vivid pictures in his mind, and these in his mad-house came thronging to him from all the countries in the world. The mermaid with her scaled infant is there, I fancy, because Smart had pored some day on one of those old maps in which the wind-gods blow from the four quarters and mermaids rise from the ocean waves. Obscure facts from books on natural history have lodged in his memory like seeds and spring up into blossom in the *Song*.

Smart had naturally fine senses, keen to appreciate beauty in every form. It is manifest throughout the stanzas of the *Song*. His delight in colour and intimate detail is specially remarkable. Even in the paraphrase of the Psalms we find occasional stanzas not unworthy of the *Song* itself; this, for example, from the 114th Psalm.

Near them through blossoms bursting ripe
The birds upon the perches pipe,
As boughs the herbage shield;
And while each other they salute
The trees from every quivering shoot
Melodious music yield

though in the *Song* there is a more intimate picture where

The scholar bulfinch aims to catch
The soft flute's ivory touch.

The colours glowing in plumage or fur, or radiating from precious stones, had caused Smart an intensity of pleasure. These minuter splendours alternate with pictures of delighted movement—the speed of horse and ostrich—and evocations of great horizons, as in

Beauteous the fleet before the gale

rising at last into sublimity:

Glorious the sun in mid career,
Glorious the assembled fires appear,
Glorious the comet's train:
Glorious the trumpet and alarm,
Glorious the Almighty's stretcht-out arm;
Glorious the enraptured main.

But it is above all the expression of joy in the senses that sets the *Song* apart from the poetry of his time; a sensuousness which must have been inherent in Smart's nature, but which for so many years had been suppressed under the despotism of eighteenth-century taste. Only madness, it seems, could release it.

For Smart in the days of his sanity was of an acquiescent mind. In his religion, for all his enthusiasm, he was completely orthodox, and in literary taste he conformed to the canons he found prevailing among his contemporaries. He was utterly unlike Blake in this respect; for Blake was a visionary and a rebel from the first. So we come to the question: Does poetry need a kind of madness for its liberation? Is the case of Christopher Smart only an extreme instance of what happens at the birth of all fine poetry?

In any case, however it was brought about, we may feel certain that Smart when he composed the *Song* was in what is for poets the propitious state. The faculties which we use in dealing with the ordinary affairs of existence, the logical processes of thought by which we deal with more abstract problems, both are in abeyance; a state of acutely heightened sensibility supervenes: the surface of life seems to be sponged away; we are aware of something welling up within us from some unknown source.

You may remember the words of the poet in *Timon of Athens*. A painter accosts him:

You are rapt, Sir, in some work, some dedication
To the great lord.

and he answers:

A thing slipt idly from me.
Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes
From whence 'tis nourished.

Poetry appears, then, to be a kind of secretion. But what is it that stimulates its flow? That is something which no one can predict. It may be a sight, a sound, a scent; it may be the haunting rhythm of a phrase; probably with each individual poet it tends to be something different and peculiar to himself. An unusual physical condition may predispose to what I have called the propitious state. It may be induced, we have recently been told, by the drinking of a pot of beer; and wine has been found by some to be a favouring influence, though Shelley needed nothing more exciting than water. *Kubla Khan* is a classic instance of a marvellous poem composed in a dream after Coleridge had taken two drops of opium. It is not so well known that Crabbe took opium to relieve the troubles of his digestion; and I think the stimulus of the drug can be seen in the visions of *Sir Eustace Grey*. I would like to dwell for a moment on that remarkable and too little known poem, because it provides a kind of distant parallel to the case of Smart. Crabbe was a realist, a recorder, an observer; he wrote with his eye on the object. He was capable of touches of imaginative insight; but normally his poetic powers were under conscious control. In this poem, however, he describes a visit to the mad-house in which Sir Eustace Grey is confined; and in a tranquil interval the unfortunate man recounts the hallucinations which have tormented him. Crabbe was taking opium at the time when this poem was composed. I suggest that his opium dreams had powerfully impressed themselves on his mind, and that, wishing to embody them in a poem, he conceived the idea of a poem about a madman which would give him the opportunity desired.

At any rate there is in the central stanzas of *Sir Eustace Grey* an element which surprises us. Something in Crabbe's mind seems to be released which is not in his normal verse.

The madman describes how he comes into the power of two fiends who lead him out into strange regions where Time has ceased.

There was I fixed, I know not how,
Condemned for unknown years to stay;
Yet years were not; one dreadful Now
Endured no change of night or day;
The same mild evening's sleeping ray
Shone softly solemn and serene,
And all that time I gazed away
The setting sun's sad rays were seen.

THE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER SMART

At length a moment's sleep stole on.
 Again came my commissioned foes;
 Again through sea and land we're gone,
 No peace, no respite, no repose;
 Above the dark broad sea we rose,
 We ran through bleak and frozen land;
 I had no strength their strength to oppose,
 An infant in a giant's hand.

They placed me where those streamers play,
 Those nimble beams of brilliant light;
 It would the stoutest heart dismay
 To see, to feel, that dreadful sight:
 So swift, so pure, so cold, so bright,
 They pierced my frame with icy wound,
 And all that half-year's polar night
 Those dancing streamers wrapt me round.

I spoke just now of the propitious, the desirable state, the state in which everything perceived by the senses comes to us with an extraordinary glow and vividness; in which words seem living things with the bloom and mystery of flowers. But it is possible to pass into this state and yet for nothing to come of it. It remains impalpable and does not crystallize into form.

The poet in *Timon* compares poetry to an oozing gum; but immediately afterwards, changing the metaphor, he says

the fire i' the flint
 Shows not till it be struck.

And this is also true. It is only when the ideal form or ideal subject presents itself as a vessel into which the ferment of thought and feeling is to be poured, that the poem comes about. I suppose Crabbe to have consciously sought out a subject into which he could introduce the nightmare visions he had experienced. Smart, much less deliberately, I expect, found the perfect subject to embody his state of ecstasy. The story of David had long possessed his imagination. He had made a close study of the Psalms. The subject of David playing to Saul had once been suggested to him by a Cambridge friend, but he had been deterred by the greatness of the theme. Was it not Smart's *Song* which suggested to Browning in the succeeding century his own fine poem *Saul*?

So when in his state of ecstasy he was filled with a sense of the glory of creation and the greater glory of the Creator, David the Singer came spontaneously before him to give body and shape to his exaltation and emotion. Here was a theme into which he could

pour all his inner experience. Glimpses of beauty seen for a moment and treasured in the memory; the colours of the dawn, the splendour of a flower, the gleam of goldfish in water, the song of a bullfinch—a hundred images evoked by pages of books read long ago, emotions of gratitude and affection welling up from the past—all these thronged pell-mell into Smart's mind, to mingle with reminiscences of Horace, of Milton, and above all the Psalms, and were submerged in 'the beauty, force, and vehemence' (to use his own words) of a single overwhelming inspiration.

In the memoir of Smart his editor tells how he would spring from his bed to write down, before he forgot it, some phrase or image that had come to him; perhaps one of those waking visions which are apt to visit the mind before the body falls asleep; the kind of visions which Blake accepted as having the authority of reality, but which to most poets are welcome for the hints and evocations they supply. The legend that Smart scratched the *Song to David* with a key on the walls of his asylum cell may well have this foundation, that he would scribble lines he wished to remember on the wall when he had no paper handy.

Smart was no doubt in our modern phrase exploiting the unconscious in himself. But he was quite unaware that he was doing it. And this was to his great advantage.

Poetry appeals to something very deep in our nature, far deeper than our ordinary, everyday consciousness. And if it is to make its full appeal, it must come from a corresponding depth in the poet's nature. I think I read somewhere the other day that the creation of poetry is just a successful attempt to tap the unconscious self. But to try to turn on the tap, with an acutely self-conscious effort, only perhaps to uncover a mess of arbitrary images and impulses, is not, it seems to me, the way to work.

I remember once dreaming that I had discovered an unknown essay of Charles Lamb's. I read it in my dream with delight, thinking all the time of the pleasure I should share with friends and the excitement it would cause in the world of letters. Another time I came in a dream upon an unknown sonnet of Milton's. What these compositions were really like, I cannot say; for when I woke nothing but a stray phrase or two remained in my memory. But here was one part of my brain enthusiastically admiring as something completely fresh what another part (I suppose) of the same brain was simultaneously composing on its own account. Such experiences are, I dare say, common enough. But when I think of such mysterious goings-on within oneself and such subtle powers of self-deception, doesn't the introduction of the conscious

mind into these obscure depths seem like the plunging of a great clumsy hand into an inconceivably delicate machinery?

Mr. A. E. Housman, in the lecture he gave last year at Cambridge, said: 'That the intellect is not the fount of poetry, that it may actually hinder its production . . . is best seen in the case of Smart.' I was reminded of this when in reading a recent book on Walt Whitman's unpublished manuscripts I came upon Whitman's exclamation: 'Intellect is a fiend'; and in another place he counsels the poet when engendering a poem, 'Veil thy strong perceptions. Musing, retire within thyself.'

It may seem incongruous to cite Whitman in connexion with Smart, but there is a point of affinity between them. There was a strong mystical element in Whitman; he even practised an art of meditation to induce the propitious state. He professed himself unable to explain his own writings. The preliminary to creation was for him 'a trance, yet with all the senses alert'.

Smart was not, precisely speaking, a mystic. His God was a transcendent God, outside the universe. He does not deal in symbols. Yet I wonder, if he had been born at a different time and under other influences, whether he would not have found that he was a mystic. I have spoken of his sensuousness as giving the *Song to David* a place apart in the eighteenth century. But this joy of the senses is in the *Song* drenched in religious feeling, in the mood of adoration. And in that mood he sees everything in nature glowing and distinct, as it glows in the mystic's vision.

We have seen how Smart in one of his earlier poems conceived of Reason and Imagination as two separate powers of the mind, which could help each other but never unite in marriage. But surely in the great poems of the world there is this marriage; and perhaps the defect of the *Song to David* is that the union is imperfect. In the eighteenth century it was a general belief that works of art could be produced by observing rules discoverable by reason. Dr. Johnson dismissed as a fantastic foppery Gray's profession of inability to write except at certain times or at happy moments. I am sure, however, that we shall all agree with Mr. Housman when he says that the intellect is not the fount of poetry.

No effort of intellect will ever produce what I have called the propitious state. But Mr. Housman goes on to push his doctrine farther than I can follow. 'It is not what is said but the way it is said that matters.' At first one is inclined to a ready assent. But then a doubt arises: is this the whole of the truth? The phrasing suggests an antithesis, suggests that the form can be separated from the substance, that what is said is one thing and the way it is said

another. And other expressions of Mr. Housman's—'poetry neat', poetry 'adulterated with meaning'; and the remark about Blake's songs, 'the meaning is a poor foolish disappointing thing in comparison with the verses themselves'—these provoke in my mind something more than doubt.

For what is the meaning of a poem? It is not, I submit, the idea or the emotion we extract from it, it is nothing less than the poem itself in its achieved form. Blake's lyrics could not be what they are without that peculiar outlook on the world which is behind them, and this gives an edge and force to the expression, even when it is not explicit on the surface.

I may be misinterpreting Mr. Housman, but he seems to me to imply that intellect supplies the meaning of a poem and that some other faculty supplies the form or expression, and that only the last has any poetic value. But how can we disentangle the faculties that are at work in the creation of a poem? If the initial prompting come from a thought, the thought will be suffused by emotion, it will attract to itself a clothing of imagery, or no poem will result. If the poem starts with an emotion or merely with a rhythm, the shaping faculty will seize on these and transform them, and who shall say that the working of the intellect is not present?

It is all surely a question of fusion. When a poem appeals merely or mainly to the intelligence, it is a proof that there is an unfused element in it and by so much it fails to be poetry. The appeal, in my view, is not to any single sensibility, but to the whole being; just as the poem comes from the whole being, the full experience of the poet. I have tried to show how this happened in the case of Christopher Smart. His madness did not destroy his intellect, or let us rather say his understanding (for intellect is associated too much with the kind of brain possessed by philosophers and mathematicians and eminent lawyers) when he wrote the *Song to David*. If we knew nothing of Smart's life, should we say that the poem was the work of a madman? I think not. What his mental disturbance does seem to have effected was, as I have suggested, an estrangement of his mind from his century, a liberation of the vein of true and impassioned poetry that was in him but so long disguised and hidden.

We picture Smart as developing from a boy of keen sensibilities into a young man of careless and convivial habits. A Fellow of his College at Cambridge he thought of himself—it is the theme of a poem—as a caged eagle; a secluded scholar's life was little to his taste. He disliked constraint and discipline. Between him and Gray, who was also a Fellow of Pembroke, there was the same kind

of natural antipathy as between Dostoevsky and Turgenev; Gray's regular habits and precise demeanour irritated his impulsive and emotional temperament. The other dons were lenient to his lapses. Probably they were not different from the contemporary Oxford dons, of whom Gibbon wrote, 'Their dull and deep potations excused the brisk intemperance of youth'. So far Smart appears to the world as the not uncommon type of artist who essays to fill the part of a man of genius as popularly conceived, hoping that an irresponsible egoism with a touch of wildness and a spirit of self-confidence will reflect prestige upon his mediocre productions. Of intellectual or imaginative revolt against the prevalent ideals there is not a trace.

He marries in secret, leaves Cambridge, becomes an inhabitant of Grub Street, a literary hack. He had always been in debt, and with a weak constitution was careless of his health. Whatever his failings, he was a lovable being, friendly and affectionate, and did not want for friends like Johnson and Garrick; but as a poet he seems a mere candidate for oblivion. Beneath this rather squalid exterior existence what powers were lurking? Both his madness and his hidden vein of splendid poetry seem to have been intimately allied with the religious enthusiasm which had been growing within him, we do not know for how long. Religious emotion had not lifted Smart's Seatonian compositions on the Supreme Being into poetry. But madness came with violent paroxysms, and the miracle was somehow effected. Religious exaltation was for once fused with richly sensuous imagery, and Smart's secret nature came glowing into light.

There was no second flowering. We have a glimpse of Smart after his release from confinement in a pleasant lodging overlooking Birdcage Walk and St. James's Park. We read of his 'ardour of kindness'; and again we see him through the eyes of Fanny Burney 'extremely grave' and still with 'great wildness in his manners, looks, and voice'. But the end was not now distant. In the course of a few years, says his discreet biographer, 'Mr. Smart's œconomy forsook him, and he was confined for debt in the King's Bench'. There he died, and so we take farewell of him. Were his last years consoled by the consciousness of having created that one marvellous poem? Or had he perhaps forgotten that he had ever written it?

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